



Dialectical tensions: Marcuse, Dunayevskaya and the problems of the age

Thesis Eleven
2016, Vol. 134(1) 107–121
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0725513616647564
the.sagepub.com



Raya Dunayevskaya, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, *The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse–Fromm Correspondence, 1954–1978: Dialogues on Hegel, Marx and Critical Theory*, eds Anderson KB and Rockwell R (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012).

Reviewed by: Damian Gerber, *University of Queensland, Australia*;
Shannon Brincat, *Griffith University, Australia*

Abstract

There has been a resurgence of interest in the work of Raya Dunayevskaya and Herbert Marcuse, particularly regarding their shared concern with humanism and dialectics. Recent edited collections on Dunayevskaya's correspondence have, however, drawn a sharp contrast between the conceptions of the dialectical method: Dunayevskaya, who emphasized the need for 'philosophic new beginnings' to offer a new relationship between theory and practice, and Herbert Marcuse who, despite his piercing identification of the one-dimensionality of late capitalism, continued with a problematic basis in (orthodox) Marxist categories. In this review essay, we outline the latest of these two volumes and its distinct contributions before engaging in a critique of Marcuse's restrictions on humanism and dialectics, via a comparison with Dunayevskaya's dialectical approach that was premised on questioning 'the problems of the age' and emphasized the open and negative polarity of dialectical possibilities.

Keywords

critical theory, dialectics, Dunayevskaya, humanism, Marcuse, Marxism

... the limits of the age one lives with, which creates the concrete ... also exhausts it.
(Dunayevskaya, 2012: 78)

Corresponding authors:

Damian Gerber, School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia.

Email: d.gerber@inbox.lv

Shannon Brincat, School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, 4111, Australia.

Email: s.brincat@griffith.edu.au

Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest in the work of Raya Dunayevskaya and Herbert Marcuse, particularly regarding their shared concern with dialectics and humanism. Recent edited collections charting their correspondence have, however, revealed a sharp contrast between their conceptions of dialectics and its implications for a humanist politics: Dunayevskaya, who emphasized the need for ‘philosophic new beginnings’ to reinvigorate revolutionary praxis, and Herbert Marcuse who, despite his piercing identification of the one-dimensionality of late capitalism, remained attached to orthodox Marxist categories that, in the end, seemed to eschew any enduring notion of revolutionary possibility. In this essay, we engage Marcuse and Dunayevskaya’s correspondence presented in Anderson and Rockwell’s *The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse–Fromm Correspondence, 1954–1978*, cross-referenced with their major works. Specifically, we develop a critique of Marcuse’s restrictions on humanism and dialectics, via a comparison with Dunayevskaya’s dialectical approach and its radical commitment to revolutionary praxis. Whereas much has been made of Marcuse’s thought, particularly by the New Left, Dunayevskaya’s reception has been far less than what she is due. In the hope of spurring further scholarly engagement with her legacy, we show that her insistence on ‘the problems of the age’ – the open and negative polarity of dialectical possibilities *in the present* – offers a critical and highly useful dialectical approach to the social contradictions of today.

Overview of the Marcuse–Dunayevskaya debate

The Marcuse–Dunayevskaya debate centred upon the challenge of refining or renouncing the basic concepts, systems, and categories of Marxism that had been rendered obsolete by developments in late, global capitalism. In Dunayevskaya’s self-critique, the constant questioning of herself and social movements around her, we find ample evidence of self-reflexive unbinding of thought from such static thought. Marcuse, on the other hand, tended to become trapped by some of the contradictions his own analysis had drawn between the declining potentialities of class consciousness in ‘advanced industrial society’ and the uncertain and heteronomous demographics comprising the New Left. This is not to overplay their shared concerns and radical agenda, but rather to identify from the outset their points of separation. As Marcuse admitted when reading over Dunayevskaya’s work, their meeting was typified by ‘such a large area of complete agreement’ met with ‘such a large area of disagreement’ (2012: 94).

Marcuse’s pivotal work, *One Dimensional Man* (1964), asserted that the fundamental situation of organized labour (along with the general liquidation of human rationality under advanced industrial society) had changed indefinitely. Accordingly, the basic demands of the union and workers’ movement, once antagonistic to the status quo, had been consolidated and placated within capitalism – at least in its Keynesian phase. Thought and behaviour now expressed a false consciousness consistent with the interests of domination, embodied in the ‘prevailing technical apparatus’ that contributed to the ‘preservation of a false order of facts’, thereby reproducing it (Marcuse, 1964: 107). Against instrumental/technical rationality that had ceded material products

as commensurate with freedom itself, the potential for negative (dialectical) thinking to pierce the veil of ideology was bleak. To think *through* things ‘other than they are’ was becoming less and less possible, for under the rule of a ‘repressive whole’ even liberty had been ‘made into a powerful instrument of domination’. In this context, Marcuse could only appeal to the non-repressed psychological and non-integrated social forces (minorities, outsiders, nonconformists), who he believed retained the capacity to participate in the Great Refusal – ‘the protest against that which is’, of refusing ‘to go along’. Despite this, at every stage Marcuse could not see a means beyond the false totality of the ‘antagonistic society’ to which the great refusal was linked (1964: 55, 138). The increasing domination of technological rationality, buttressed by the state, capitalism and culture industry, meant that the Happy Consciousness had come to prevail – the conformist, non-individual, consumer – with the result of ‘the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and the alternatives’ (1964: 66). The overall tone of Marcuse’s work became saturated – or to borrow from Anderson and Rockwell – ‘imbued’ with the centrality of one-dimensional society that *seemed* to render liberation impossible (Anderson and Rockwell, 2012: xliii). The closure of the dialectic under a totally-administered false consciousness meant emancipation was lost to a future that could never be.

A key part of this divergence between Marcuse and Dunayevskaya in their political commitments and analysis results from their different readings of the dialectic. For Marcuse that ‘technological reality’ had conjoined the subject and object ‘so closely that the notion of object necessarily includes the subject’. That is, the originary ground of dialectics, the view that subject and object are conjoined, however antagonistically (and thereby that facts embody the knower), is overcome: in late capitalism, object *dominates* subject (Marcuse, 1982: 451). In stark contrast to this seeming ontological absolute, and directly opposed to Marcuse’s technological thesis, Dunayevskaya staunchly insisted that ‘I still consider that subject absorbs object, and not object subject which then becomes *its* extension’ (2012: 98). This assertion was made possible through her insistence on a fundamental insight of the young Hegel, contra. Marcuse: that the totality of bourgeois society, however implacably ‘positive’ in the form of its self-image, nevertheless remains an *antagonistic* totality (see Rose, 2009: 68–72). As such, the reality of unfreedom concealed beneath the ultimately false ‘freedom’ of Marcuse’s Happy Consciousness does not cease to exist in those parts of the world where class tensions are heightened and the Hegelian ‘notion’ of freedom is increasingly revealed as at odds with its merely existent social image. What is at stake in the argument between Dunayevskaya and Marcuse pertains to a divergent interpretation of Hegel’s Absolute in light of its historical-material significance: namely whether the socially-patterned ‘Happy Consciousness’ of ‘advanced industrial society’ is universal enough to become a new cultural Absolute indefinitely forestalling any revolutionary transformation, or whether the chasm between the notion of freedom and its debased social reality *itself* constitutes the Absolute of the antagonistic totality, and therefore one amenable to a change that would arise out of its class and gender antagonisms.

For Dunayevskaya, it is in this negative quality that the Absolute perennially raises the question in humanity of whether it is ‘possible for another age to make a new beginning’ (2003: 37). This ‘new beginning’, in Dunayevskaya’s reading of her own

time, was signalled by the impulses arising from the revolutionary practices both within the Soviet sphere that sought to make the revolution humanist (i.e. East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956) and those in the US (and West more widely) in the progressive black, youth, anti-Vietnam war, labour, and women's movements (2003: Ch. 9). For her, it was these new social forces that retained the revolutionary impulse and offered real alternatives in the dialectic of liberation. These could uproot exploitative relations, not only of capital and labour but also of 'man-woman' and race, to create 'totally new human relations' (2003: xxxv). Clearly, Dunayevskaya retained an optimistic appraisal of history – not that change would come through some Kantian act of good will but through the dialectical negation of the 'two worlds in opposition', of subjective thought and objective actuality (2003: xxxvii, xxxix). Against Marcuse's pessimism, throughout *Philosophy and Revolution*, and her correspondence with Marcuse, Dunayevskaya repeats that the essential point in Hegel's *Logic* is that: 'philosophy appears as subjective cognition, of which liberty is the aim, and which is itself the way to produce it' (Hegel, 1969: §576). This makes Trotsky's understanding of revolution in permanence central to Dunayevskaya's thought, just as it does in compelling each generation to look at their conditions of crisis anew. In this way of thinking, the dialectic never ceases. The future is open.

Such are the two broad philosophical positions encapsulating Marcuse and Dunayevskaya's thought that directly informed their correspondence beginning at the end of 1954. While their relationship reached its watermark, arguably, with Marcuse's generous but constructively critical preface to Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom* in 1958, their vivid discussions – indeed, heated debates – illuminate not only a divergence between these two theorists of the radical left, but a real and ongoing tension within the movement itself: the problem of crises and the need to re-engage with changed historical circumstances. As we shall show, Marcuse's and Dunayevskaya's understandings of dialectical analysis – and their commitment to it – lead to very different understandings of the social totality of late capitalism and what *we* can do.

The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse–Fromm correspondence, 1954–1978

The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse correspondence, as a whole, does not depart significantly from the theoretical orbit of Marxism; Dunayevskaya's more theoretical letters rarely stray from discussions of Hegel's and Marx's basic texts, and there is little discussion of the broader left to be met with in the responses from the other correspondents, with perhaps the exception of their critical remarks on existentialism, Maoism and Leninism. Another notable exception is the inclusion of some correspondence broadly related to socialist feminism and black liberation movements, chiefly initiated by Dunayevskaya in some of her later letters to Fromm. Furthermore, the basic notion of 'Marxist humanism' which so clearly inspired the writings of Dunayevskaya and Fromm, and even Marcuse to a lesser extent, should be understood as a radical and somewhat libertarian interpretation of Marx, not too far removed from, for example, that of Daniel Guérin. And while this volume of correspondence is probably insufficient as a basis for a thorough understanding of this much-neglected effort to interpret Marx on a humanistic basis, a

vision of Marx nonetheless emerges throughout the reader's journey which is quite certainly far to the left of most 'mainstream' interpretations of Marx that occur in contemporary 'Marxism'.

Just as important were the practical realities that animated so much of the discourse set forth in the correspondence. Early on in the collection of the Dunayevskaya–Marcuse correspondence, for example, we find a clear disagreement between Marcuse and Dunayevskaya on the subject of the influence of the American Civil War on the structure and development of Marx's *Capital*. Later, we encounter the uneasiness and ambivalence which Dunayevskaya must have felt upon reading (and reviewing) Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*. As the editors note, Dunayevskaya wrote a 'stinging critique' of *Soviet Marxism* that, published only two years after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution which it completely ignored, found Marcuse 'surprisingly uncritical of the Soviet Union'. Marcuse's focus was 'not on the self-liberation movements from within' but rather how 'the ruled tend not only to submit to their rulers but also to reproduce in themselves their subordination' (2012: xxxii). Dunayevskaya's attack on Marcuse's book casts aspersions on Marcuse's aura as a libertarian socialist, an aura that would later be so widely cultivated in the wake of his participation in the New Left. This is not to overlook that Marcuse's method in *Soviet Marxism* was thoroughly immanent, nor that his later *Essay on Liberation* did not herald a re-awakening of these humanist themes. Rather, it is to highlight the exclusions in his analysis that speak far more loudly in their absence.

The differences which were to eventually terminate the regular correspondence between Dunayevskaya and Marcuse reached their apogee with the publication of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, more specifically with what she perceived as his falling into line with Horkheimer and Adorno's pessimism about the revolutionary potentialities of the working class in light of class collaboration, false consciousness, worker automation, and Keynesian economic theory in the decades of the post-Second World War era. A particular motif with important ramifications for Marxism generally was the vastly different conclusions drawn by Dunayevskaya and Marcuse in relation to the pamphlet by the former's comrade Charles Denby titled *Workers Battle Automation* (Detroit, 1960). In response to Marcuse's disillusionment Dunayevskaya posits:

It is true that Automation and state capitalism are not only 'quantitative' but qualitative changes in our contemporary society and that that predominant fact would also affect a *part* of the proletariat. But a part is not the whole. Indeed, the fact that gives the appearance of an affluent society not only in the bourgeois sector but in the masses – the millions of employed so that the 5 million unemployed look 'little' – does not show that those unemployed are *predominantly in the production workers*. No suburbia here. It is all concentrated in the industrial centers, among an organized but wilddcatting proletariat and aggravated by the Negro Question which is by no means quiescent and among a youth that has shown that they are not rebels without a cause but with one . . . they are in search of a total philosophy and are not getting themselves ready for the dustbin of history. (2012: 65, original emphasis)

Marcuse's rather different interpretation of this period of capitalism is not well advanced in their correspondence; indeed, at times, his replies are short-shrift and evasive. Yet an acquaintance with *One Dimensional Man* is adequate to make his own

disagreements clear; Marcuse's estimation of technological and instrumental domination had closed off the possible historical (re)emergence of dialectical sublation. As the basic units of Marxist analysis, the notion of the worker as the subject of history (conveyed perhaps most emphatically by Lukács), the emancipation of the toilers by the toilers themselves, the analysis of the production and organization of labour, etc., are fundamentally placed in jeopardy by Marcuse's analysis in *One Dimensional Man* (as Dunayevskaya implicitly suggests); and yet Marcuse nonetheless held fast to the basic Marxist frames of reference in much of his work (unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, who were at least more consistent in abandoning much of Marxism through their disillusionment with the working class). This unresolved contradiction, well documented in their correspondence, raises even broader questions about the divergent interpretations of Marxist humanism held by Marcuse and Dunayevskaya.

The limitations of Marcuse's socialist humanism

The limitations of Marcuse's application of dialectics to understand the technological society of late capitalism was not only a methodological oversight but had profoundly abortive implications for his political commitments. Yet the correspondence can only get us so far in grasping the key differences between Marcuse and Dunayevskaya on this nexus point of humanism and dialectics. An important supplement to their correspondence is provided in their shared contributions to Fromm's edited collection *Socialist Humanism* (1965), a unique forum that confirms many of the differences expressed in their letters. Here, Marcuse's bleak assessment of the possibilities for 'socialist humanism' are clearly juxtaposed to Dunayevskaya's keen analysis of the possibilities of Marx's humanism in the present (see Marcuse, 1965; Fromm, 1965).¹

Marcuse begins his assessment by emphasizing reality as 'open' and specifying the central task as developing 'future alternatives'. Yet, despite this open narrative, Marcuse examines the possibilities for the alternative of 'socialist humanism' against very specific criteria: the 'technical capability and productivity' of capitalist and communist societies existing at the time (1965: 98). Marcuse defines socialism as something beyond the 'realm of necessity' – an idea weaned from a particular reading of the 'two-stage' thesis from Marx's 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' (derived from Marx, 1962: 23–5). Only abundance can result in the satisfaction of needs without exploitation and minimal toil through the social organization of labour. This starting point is crucial because it places at the forefront productivist and distributional categories that are themselves expressions of bourgeois society and which reduce the relative importance of wider considerations (humanist, environmental, feminist, and so on) from the outset – exclusions that call into question the ability of this dialectical framework to understand the 'whole'. A key reason for the subsequent defects in his analysis stem from this foundation in what is, essentially, orthodox Marxist categories for understanding the transition to socialism. By according the possibility of socialist humanism to strictly technical or instrumental determinants, Marcuse reduces the emancipatory moment to merely overcoming scarcity and creating consumption without limits – a far cry from the 'true realm of freedom' and 'real human development' promised by Marx (1981: 959). To borrow from Lebowitz, this accords to a specific understanding of historical

development in which it is believed that only the enormous development of productive forces can permit distribution in accordance with need. Yet this is to promote a defect inherited from capitalism in which the person enters into relations as an owner of their capacity to produce as a *worker*, not a *human-being* (Lebowitz, 2010: 70–2). The problem is that such theorists – ‘two-stagers’ as Lebowitz derides those like Lenin (or Marcuse) – transform this defect into a socialist principle, when the whole point is to transcend it (Lebowitz, 2014: 95).

It is precisely Marcuse’s inability to transcend these orthodox categories, however, that leads to the otherwise insoluble equivocation of technological abundance with the decline of class consciousness and struggle for freedom. The potential ‘rational organization’ of society – a reorganization that could allow for the development of the ‘all-rounded individual’ of Marx’s ideal – is pitted against how Marcuse sees ‘rising productivity and power’ as suppressing any potential for resolving the contradictions of the present. He writes:

As technical progress provides the instrumentalities for a rational organisation of the realm of necessity far beyond anything Marx envisaged . . . these instruments are used for perpetuating and even intensifying the struggle for existence . . . Not only the political but also (and primarily) the technical apparatus and production itself have become systems of domination into which the labouring classes are incorporated and incorporate themselves. (1965: 99)

So, despite technical progress that has made the rational (re)organization of society possible, Marcuse finds that, in reality, it only perpetuates and intensifies ‘the struggle for existence’ (1965: 101). The promise for a ‘better life’ actually produces a ‘denial of humanity’ (1965: 104), a denial to which the working class acquiesces. This fatalistic conclusion is deduced from Marcuse’s prior acceptance of the ‘two-stage thesis’ that made emancipation reliant on ‘technical apparatus and production’ (1965: 98), because, methodologically, it compels Marcuse to focus myopically on the technical capabilities of contemporary society that he deems alone can provide the conditions of emancipation. Wider relations are neglected.

It is important to note here that Adorno was only half right in his assessment of the shift in Marcuse’s thought. Adorno had observed that Marcuse’s movement away from Heideggerian categories corresponded to a shift from ontology to history, that is, from ‘Being’ to ‘concrete-being-in-the-world’ (Marcuse, 1982: 444). But this move to concreteness was only ever partial because it remained disengaged from wider relational processes and the ecological context of human history. That is, Marcuse’s analysis remained fixated largely on Western agency and, up until his final work, divorced from the ecological foundation of all social life. In effect, Marcuse contradicted his own dialectical method that he stipulated was to first identify the potentialities in the present (*negative thinking*) and then identify the conditions of possibility that can be acted upon to alter that reality (*determinate negation*) (Marcuse, 1982: 444–5). Yet Marcuse’s analysis of the possibilities of socialist humanism failed to move beyond mere negative thinking to determinate negation: he identifies the potentialities in the present but not the redefinition of the concepts/facts themselves, or the conditions of possibility, for a

socialist humanism. Rather, his account affirms the total ‘incorporation’ of those who were once potential agents of emancipation into systems of domination, thereby cancelling the negativity of the dialectic at the point in historical time in which a totally-administered technological apparatus, in his assessment, dominates humanity. Because the proletariat are seen strictly as an economic subject, and socialism merely as an economic system of distribution, not only is Marcuse’s emancipatory goal totally dominated by an economistic-technical viewpoint, but his analysis lacks any connection to the broader, arguably antagonistic totality that, in terms of its concrete potentialities, already contains the tensions necessary to produce its own negation. The reverent authoritarian mantra of Margaret Thatcher, ‘that there is no alternative’, is resignedly accepted decades before it was expressed.

This is not to suggest that Marcuse fails to identify a clear resolution to this paradox. For him, a ‘fundamental change in *the direction of technical progress*’ is the prerequisite for the realization of the humanistic content of socialism (1965: 99–100). The problem is that he believes that humanism (and Marx’s ideal of the ‘all-rounded individual’) pertains to a stage before the domination of the culture industry and scientific management over social life (1965: 100). What is desperately needed is to somehow sever the link between technical progress and domination. But given the litany of social institutions Marcuse observes arrayed against this possibility – from media to poverty – this task seems impossible, resulting in the abrogation of ‘classical content’ of ‘the realm of freedom’ itself. That is, the ‘technical apparatus’ of advanced industrialism is totalitarian – it administers ‘all dimensions of life’ including negative and positive thinking (1965: 103). How can this technological society that breeds total domination be redirected towards becoming the prerequisite for socialist humanism? Marcuse’s thesis is ultimately self-defeating. As he laments, humanism has failed due to overdevelopment in which ‘the productive apparatus, under repressive direction, has grown into an apparatus of ubiquitous controls’. In these conditions he admits ‘the chances of a humanistic reconstruction are very poor’ (1965: 103).

Dunayevskaya on the possibilities of socialist humanism today

As we have seen, Marcuse was resigned to a bleak assessment of the emancipatory potential of socialist humanism in the future. Indeed, his paper was titled with a question mark, indicating a fundamental scepticism toward the very notion of socialist humanism in ‘advanced industrial society’ (1965: 96). By contrast, for Dunayevskaya, it is humanism that gives socialism its ‘force and direction’, without which it would lose sight of the goal of the ‘all-rounded individual’ and turn instead to a mere question of production/consumption rather than ‘freely associated labour’ and the relations of production (1965: 63–4, citing Marx, 1906: 649). Indeed she chastises Marcuse for falling into the ‘trap of viewing Marxian socialism as if it were a distributive philosophy’ (2012: 63). Such a turn would reify and perpetuate the very ideological distortions of false consciousness under the dominance of capitalist production, forgetting that it is only under capitalism that ‘[r]elations between men *appear* as the relation between things’ (Marx, 1906: 84, emphasis added). On this basis, Marcuse’s claim that object dominates subject under late capitalism is not true to the incisiveness of Marx’s critique of

alienation, particularly that of the ‘thingification’ of labour and social life into the form of the commodity and exchange value, forgetting their ultimately *human* origins. Whilst social relations appear in this manner – and, indeed, is all ‘they really are’ in an alienated society – the point is to not ‘uncritically’ accept them but to transcend this condition (1906: 84). This is consistent with Dunayevskaya’s thesis in *Marxism and Freedom* that sought to re-establish what she called the ‘original form’ of Marxism, that is, the thorough-going ‘naturalism as humanism’ in which the categories of the younger Marx are not just economic but social (Dunayevskaya, 2000, xxi, citing Marx, 1975: 336). It is this Hegelian ‘live element’ that Dunayevskaya traces all the way from the early to the late Marx (to *Capital*, Vol. III) (Dunayevskaya, 2012: 36), arguing that the struggle for shortening of the work day, or the emphasis on the proletariat as the ‘self-developing “subject”’ and the individual as ‘personal and free’, are all manifestations of this fundamental humanist concern (see esp. 2012: 35, 67–71).²

For Dunayevskaya, the proletariat is the object of alienated society becoming subject, that is, revolting and attempting to actualize self-emancipation, or what she calls the practice of ‘freedom’ (1965: 65). But rather than residing solely in the working class, she points to the Freedom Now movement in addition to the Hungarian, Hundred Flowers, and African revolutions, as proofs of the ongoing practices toward humanism outside the frame of orthodox Marxism (1965: 65). Broadening out the revolutionary subject in this way illustrates Dunayevskaya’s heightened awareness of historical agency. Nevertheless, her shift from traditional Marxist categories should not be overdrawn as she continued to romanticize the decisive role to be played by labour in stripping away the fetishism of commodities. Yet her insistence on ‘freely associated labour’ (1965: 67) – emphasizing relations and ‘social categories’ rather than economic, distributive or productive forces – enabled her to not fall back on abstractions or, worse, reduce socialism to economic categories (2012: 35; 1965: 68). For Dunayevskaya, freedom was more than just the abolition of private property. What was required was the *second transcendence* beyond property toward the notion where the ‘freedom of the individual is the basis of the freedom of all’ (1965: 72).³ At every stage of analysis she draws back to this ‘question of freedom’ (1965: 68), allowing her to criticize either state capitalism or state socialism – indeed any social form bereft of the second transcendence of individual freedom through associated labour – as alienated forms of humanism.

It is this constant questioning of alienated society and the conditions of possibility within it that forms the theoretical anchorage for Dunayevskaya’s participatory and active notion of history. For in this theoretical framework it is the attempts of humanity to overcome alienation that compel her to analyse everywhere in the ‘daily lives of working people’ how they are ‘trying to reconstruct society on new beginnings’ (1965: 71). This agent-focused analysis allows Dunayevskaya to engage with the people themselves ‘and *listen* to their *thoughts*, as they battle automation, fight for the end of discrimination, or demand freedom *now*’ (1965: 73). Dunayevskaya’s other letters to Marcuse reveal important insights into what she means by society’s ‘new beginnings’ (1965: 71), or what she elsewhere refers to as ‘new political forms’ (see 2002: 97). These revolve around the ‘concrete’ analysis of the “‘new passions and new forces” for the establishment of the new society’ (2002: 97), including local workers’ struggles regarding automation but also international struggles (particularly struggles for national

liberation across Africa and the revolutions within the Soviet empire). All of these contemporaneous events, she contends, manifest Absolute negativity, or Hegel's 'absolute liberation' (2002: 97, 99, 102). For Dunayevskaya, these events confirm the deepening struggles on the 'world scene' that mark the 'dividing point' of our epoch for 'free, individual, total liberation' (2002: 103).

With over 50 years of hindsight we know these movements did not coalesce into a new humanism. But the key aspect is not Dunayevskaya's prognostication of the future; rather, it is her insistence of theory *meeting* practice. For Dunayevskaya's open-ended dialectic, and optimistic appraisal of historical possibility operating within it, stem from the centrality of 'the practice of freedom' in her theory (or stated negatively, the indefatigable tendency within humanity to overcome its alienation). Yet, of course, how humankind makes an 'object of freedom' changes throughout historical contexts – and this is something Dunayevskaya derives from her reading of Hegel (see Dunayevskaya, 2003: 133). For her, making an object of freedom is the historical, political and cognitive task of dialectical analysis (1965: 71–2). Ultimately, the 'task' of 'our age' is 'to recognise that there is a movement from practice – from the actual struggles of the day – to theory . . . [and] to work out the method whereby the movement *from theory* can meet it'. Dunayevskaya's unique praxeology, then, seeks to bring about a new understanding or 'appreciation' of the human subject 'struggling to reconstruct society' (1965: 73, 74). Consequently, the importance of Dunayevskaya is in compelling the intellectual (as much as the activist) of every new generation to confront the 'tasks' of its age, for theory to seek out the movement within the actual struggles of the day, to locate the 'new passions and new forces' for change in ways that 'suit the epoch' (2002: 107). It is this Hegelian-Marxist insight – the link between the *Logic* and the practice of freedom – that Dunayevskaya repeats to Marcuse throughout their correspondence, and which can be interpreted as an attempt, however unsuccessful, to win back Marcuse to a re-engagement with historical possibility.

'Total philosophy' and the problem of the age

Dunayevskaya admits her 'veritable obsession with Hegel's Absolute Idea' (2012: 95). Throughout her correspondence, as in *Philosophy and Revolution*, she consistently invokes how Marx and Lenin 'returned' to Hegel (2012: 96), linking not only socialism and humanism but theory and practice, history and freedom. Specifically, she reads into the turning back to Hegel's *Logic* at the critical juncture in the Russian revolution the release from the merely empirical and factual condition of revolution to its humanist concerns. This reflects what she calls the 'leap to freedom' where thought reaches a 'new human dimension' and which establishes the link between Marx and Lenin's revolutionary praxis with Hegel's idea of the historical unfolding of freedom, culminating in Lenin's dictum that humankind's 'cognition not only reflects the world, but creates it' (Dunayevskaya, 2012: 77, citing Lenin, 1961: 212). The central line Dunayevskaya focuses on in the *Logic* concerns Hegel's notion of Absolute Idea, which she interprets to read as 'to *be* free' rather than 'to *have* freedom' (2012: 5, citing Hegel, 1969: 825–44 and Hegel, 1971: 292–315). Freedom is an ontological 'dimension' of human *being*, rather than some external thing that can be possessed. It is internal to the subject. This

subject's being, however, remains a historically-mediated one, and therefore freedom remains, in the last analysis, a determination of particular historical forces and contradictions. Accordingly, while the Absolute Idea expresses 'freedom itself' (Hegel, 1971: §481) as embodied in 'the individual purified of all that interferes with its universalism', this freedom is not the purely abstract and subjective 'I think' of Descartes or the 'I will' of Kant and Fichte, but rather the *historical* consciousness of 'Spirit' as it struggles against the unfreedom of the antagonistic totality. Hegel's Absolute Idea, then, in part signifies 'the actuality of freedom' – freedom made actual in the concrete struggles of the subject to be recognized rather than to be merely subsumed as an object of domination (2012: 49).

This places as central the dialectical relation between theory and practice as a movement within the social totality *itself*, indeed a notion of freedom lying at the living base of human history and within each historically-mediated individual subject. Here, the Hegelian Absolute Idea appears as nothing less than the theoretical and practical manifestation of 'the new society' that can emerge from the dialectical development of political life as it 'struggles' in 'its movement to a classless society'. This 'new society' is one in which human freedom has 'totally unfolded' through freely associated labour (and the freedom of the individual) in which the association alone decides 'its own fate' (2012: 5–9). The emphasis here is on a radical notion of self-determination of the subject in the community of associated labour, as opposed to any formal or categorical notion. As such, against the 'mechanical materialism' of Marxists (like Bukharin and all other Diamat ideologues) who searched for 'laws' of self-determination through cause and effect, Dunayevskaya rejects such efforts as looking for self-determination applied only *externally* (2012: 72, citing Hegel, 1969: 750). Similarly, as against Marcuse's thesis that saw the dialectic reversed in technological reality, i.e. the object *dominating* subject (Marcuse, 1982: 451), for Dunayevskaya dialectics must view 'the subject as an in-and-for itself determinateness which has appropriated objectivity' (2012: 72). The second transcendence (the attainment of individual freedom through associated labour) does not result in a 'new object' but the formation of the 'self-developing subject' (2012: 79).

This recasts the legacy of Hegel's thought away from its trapping as objective idealism, towards social and agential reading of the unfolding of Spirit through the agency of humanity itself. As she writes:

Subjectivity as objectivity absorbed is not for the philosophers, but for the masses and it is they who are writing the new page of history which is at the same time a new stage in cognition ... every previous stage in philosophic cognition was made only when a new leap to freedom became possible ... [this] 'developing subject' is the 'negative factor'. (2012: 74)

Given the 'new leap to freedom' possible in her time, for Dunayevskaya the 'task' that confronted her 'age' was to first recognize this movement from practical struggles *to* theory and, secondly, to work out how the movement of theory 'can meet it' (1965: 73). When the actual can no longer 'be expressed in old terms', this is indicative of a rupture in the unity of theory and practice, where 'a new stage of cognition has not kept up with the new challenges from practice'. This can spur a renewed engagement with philosophy

that, Dunayevskaya claims, is the only thing capable of ‘illuminating’ the actual within its new challenges or conditions (2012: 97).

The key aspect for Dunayevskaya, however, is that this impulse of self-development is not just located in the proletariat. We have already seen how Dunayevskaya situated her analysis in the epochal revolutions in both the Soviet and Western empires, thereby extending the notion of revolution away from merely economic categories. By extension, this also meant the location of the ‘new subject’ throughout world society. For example, she refers to the African decade of 1950–1960 and the struggles of self-determination in ways that contrast with the formal determinations of sovereignty and decolonization, and the self-determination of 1914–24 (i.e. the Russian revolutionary epoch). Here, she deploys Hegel’s notions of self-determination and struggle for recognition as those in ‘which alone the Idea is to hear itself speak’ (2012: 78), returning again to the radical notion of self-determination of the subject in the community of associated labour. In this way, she is able to cut across the revolutionary demands of labour, women, race and youth without falling into a politics of identity. Rather, by actively seeking out these ‘new subjects’, revising her own conceptualizations accordingly, and bringing through ‘theoretically new thoughts’ from these ‘new subjects’ themselves, Dunayevskaya is able to draw from these various groups a ‘live’ demonstration of the ‘dialectic in the concrete’. This is the ground for her optimism, one which, at its core, is a dialectical thread that at every stage strives to link itself back to praxis.

For Marcuse, however, this is merely a ‘romantic glorification of the “common people”’ that he believes, far from offering a space for ‘new beginnings’, actually ‘reproduce[s] and reflect[s] the powers that be’ and manifests ‘desired attitudes and hatreds’ (Marcuse, 2012: 5). Moreover, workers, for him, have an alleged ‘affirmative attitude’ and ‘vested interest in the establishment’ (2012: 59, 60). Underlying this critique is the claim that Dunayevskaya has minimized Hegelian negation in the application of dialectics to political phenomena (2012: 7).⁴ For Marcuse, the implied relation of the Absolute Idea to the proletariat is without demonstration because what Dunayevskaya has transposed for Hegel’s Notion (as the self-determination of the new subject) is not the proletariat under capital, but the freely associated proletariat that is not yet actual (2012: 10, 8). In spite of this compelling condemnation, however, recent history – such as the political heterogeneity of the Syria-Iraq conflict, ranging from forces of religious fascism to those of a socialist communalism in the PKK – may suggest the need to take seriously Dunayevskaya’s conception of the Hegelian Absolute as a philosophical reflection of social antagonisms and as potential ‘new beginning’ for history. Recent history has indeed reiterated, arguably, the significance of Dunayevskaya’s critique of an orthodox Marxism that would hold fast to the limitations of the economic and strictly technological dimensions of bourgeois political economy, rather than embracing the humanistic dimension of Marx’s thought, which militates against such arbitrary and historically-reified limits. Within the context of a potentially disintegrated and ecologically and socially fractured world, the Dunayevskaya–Marcuse debate remains both timely and of fundamental importance to any attempt to adequately theorize the relations between Marxian philosophy and living praxis.

Conclusion

The Marcuse–Dunayevskaya debate focused on the question of revolution under conditions of late capitalism and how the social totality was to be conceived in Marxian theory. What is at stake is whether the technological and economic ‘base’ of late capitalism constitutes a social Absolute in its own right, and thus, as Marcuse maintains, indefinitely postpones the historical possibilities of revolutionary transformation through the ideological and technological capture of the proletariat; or rather, as Dunayevskaya suggests, is replete with the reality of antagonism and struggle for freedom that is continually developing in the wake of global capitalism’s manifold discontents. It is arguably Dunayevskaya that can see beyond the ‘absolute negativity’ of humanity that lies at the core of bourgeois society and to the concrete possibilities of its determinate negation. Crucially, this obliges a perspective on bourgeois society that draws out the *social* contradictions it inevitably creates *beyond* the economic and technical realm, particularly its retention of patriarchal relations, the chasm between first and third worlds, and its increasingly dire ecological crises. If Dunayevskaya is to perceive, according to her ‘total philosophy’, the social fabric of late capitalism as the ever-dynamic ground of ‘revolution in permanence’ or a series of ‘new beginnings’, this requires nothing less than that capitalism be seen as a social totality of permanent crisis.

While Marcuse seems so often to be paralyzed by the seemingly indefinite suspension of revolutionary agency at the hands of the one-dimensional society, the element of historical truth in this passes over into untruth when it seeks to hypostatize the antagonistic totality into a false ontology of social harmony, as if the decline in class consciousness or presence of ideological manipulation is sufficient in itself to resolve the antagonisms of a society riven by ever-present class, gender, and political oppression. For Dunayevskaya, on the other hand, it may be that her embrace of freedom movements blinds her both to the significant barriers in consciousness and organization that such movements face – an important corrective made by Marcuse, however polemically – and to the bizarre tension between crisis and stability upon which capitalism has thus far appeared to thrive. In the words of Dunayevskaya, dialectical thinking (Marxism) is ‘a theory of liberation or it is nothing’ (1965: 74). One could also add, as a dialectical rejoinder, that it is equally a liberation of theory through an embrace of the concrete potentialities of late capitalism’s antagonistic totality.

Notes

1. As other reviewers have noted (see Braune, 2013), it is a shame that Hudis and Rockwell did not include this as an appendix, as it would have offered a textual source alongside the dialogue of all three interlocutors.
2. This is part of Dunayevskaya’s rejection of the Althusserian distinction between the ‘young’ and ‘old’ Marx, arguing that Marx’s *Capital* only deepens his commitment to philosophic humanism (1965: 63–4).
3. It should be noted that Dunayevskaya, in her own way, does seem to reduce this humanist goal to a productionist lens. For her, the ‘all-rounded individual’ is attained where the mental and manual reunification of labour (1965: 72).
4. This argument is disingenuous, however, as it could be suggested it is in fact Marcuse that minimizes negation, or its possibility, in the political phenomena of one-dimensional society.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Braune J (2013) 'The Dunayevskaya-Marcuse-Fromm Correspondence, 1954–1978' in *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*, available at <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2013/747> (accessed May, 2016).
- Dunayevskaya R (2000) *Marxism and Freedom*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.
- Dunayevskaya R (2002) *The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, eds Hudis P and Anderson KB. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Dunayevskaya R (2003) *Philosophy and Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Dunayevskaya R, Marcuse H and Fromm E (2012) *The Dunayevskaya–Marcuse–Fromm Correspondence, 1954–1978: Dialogues on Hegel, Marx and Critical Theory*, eds Anderson KB and Rockwell R. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Fromm E (ed.) (1965) *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Hegel GWF (1969) *Science of Logic*, trans. Miller AV. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Hegel GWF (1971) *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. Wallace W and Miller AV. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press.
- Lebowitz MA (2010) *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Lebowitz MA (2014) Scarcity and the realm of freedom. In: Brincat S (ed.) *Communism in the 21st Century*, Vol. 1. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
- Lenin V (1961) *Collected Works*, Vol. 38. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marcuse H (1958) *Soviet Marxism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marcuse H (1964) *One Dimensional Man*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse H (1965) Socialist humanism? In: Fromm E (ed.) *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Marcuse H (1969) *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse H (1982) A note on dialectics. In: Arato A and Gebhardt E (eds) *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York: Continuum, 444–451.
- Marcuse H (2005) *The New Left and the 1960s: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol. 3, ed. Kellner D. London: Routledge.
- Marcuse H (2009 [1968]) Aggressiveness in advanced industrial societies. In: Marcuse H, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. London: MayFly Books.
- Marx K (1906) *Capital*, Vol. I, ed. Engels F. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co.
- Marx K (1962) Critique of the Gotha Programme. In: Marx K and Engels F, *Selected Works in Two Volumes*, Vol. 2. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 13–37.
- Marx K (1975) Critique of the Hegelian dialectic. In: Marx K and Engels F, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Marx K (1981) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 3, ed. Engels F. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rose G (2009) *Hegel Contra Sociology*. London: Verso Books.

Author biographies

Damian Gerber is a PhD Candidate at the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland. His thesis is entitled 'The Reification of Nature and Its Discontents: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Social Ecology'.

Shannon Brincat is a Griffith University Research Fellow at the School of Government and International Relations and co-founder and co-editor of the journal *Global Discourse*.